

**Interview with Gladys McElwee
Conducted by Linda Byrne for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

April 2, 2008

Linda: Today is April 2, 2008 and I am sitting in the home of Gladys McElwee. Good morning, Gladys and please will you give me your name and your address?

Gladys: My name is Gladys Oliver McElwee my address is West Moreland Road, Falls Church, Virginia 22042.

Linda: Okay Gladys, will you tell me something about yourself? Start with where you were born and your early life?

Gladys: I was born in 1928, just before my dad moved his farm to Annandale and I grew up going to dancing school since I was 6 years old through high school. Then after that I went to NY to take up ballet and I was there for about a year and I became homesick and came home and then my mother sent me to Strayer's for a Business Course. Then I worked for General Motors Acceptance Corporation for quite a while and while working there I met my ex husband and got married and had 5 kids and after my husband and I separated I worked for the government Department of Defense in various jobs there, for 21 years retired and I got this house with some money my dad left me for a down payment and I have been here ever since.

Linda: That is wonderful, so you have been in the area for a very long time.

Gladys: Since I started working in the government in 1967.

Linda: You mentioned the farm; tell me about your dad and the farm.

Gladys: My dad had several barns and I had 5 brothers to help, it was a dairy farm they had to milk the cows and at first they milked by hand then

later they got the machines to milk the cows. They had someone come by every morning to pick up the milk and take it off.

Linda: Where was this farm located?

Gladys: This farm was in Annandale. I don't remember too much about Fairlington because I was only a baby when they moved to Annandale.

Linda: There is a story about a cattle drive; can you tell us about that?

Gladys: That is when I was a baby and they moved the cows from Fairlington to Annandale and I guess he came down from Rt. 7 down Columbia Pike, of course I only heard about that, I don't remember any of that because I was only a month or two old.

Linda: Would they have driven the cattle using horses on horseback, or by foot?

Gladys: I think they just did it by foot.

Linda: So these were just dairy cows and they were gentle and not apt to run wild in neighborhoods.

Gladys: Yes, except when I was working at General Motors and my Supervisor lived right in back of the farm he said one of your cows got loose and got in my back yard. I said I was sorry about that.

Linda: So you have seen a lot of changes in your life in the area, tell me about some of them.

Gladys: I was very lucky about that, I don't remember anything about suffering during the depression because we had our own food and milk and I was treated very well. I think maybe the one that was the most spoiled out of the 8 of us. I got to go to dancing school and secretarial school.

Linda: What type of dance?

Gladys: Mostly ballet, toe dancing and I did some tap. I remember trying out for the Rockettes just for the heck of it and they told me to loose a few baby pounds. They like them real skinny, you know so I didn't go after that. I came home and went to work.

Linda: You have 5 children?

Gladys: 5 kids.

Linda: Are they in the area?

Gladys: Yes, I have one that passed away, the eldest one (Linda: I am sorry) and that is a sad situation there it was because of her husband is the reason that she is not alive. My youngest Bruce lives in Fairfax County around Herndon somewhere and he just moved from Fairfax City, and I have one who lives in Maryland.

Linda: Did your children grow up in this house?

Gladys: Basically. You wouldn't believe that I was so dumb; I had 5 kids before I realized I should have left and so when it came to be possible I had to leave where we were living because of money reasons so he went to his home and I went to mine with 5 kids.

Linda: That was a brave thing to do at that time as a woman.

Gladys: The reason I waited that long was I didn't want to burden my mother with 5 kids. That was in the 60s and the youngest one was a toddler and then 2 years up. I realized my mother was getting upset I found her crying, about the kids, it was too much for her. So I spoke to the preacher at the church and we made arrangements to send them to a home the 4 of them, not the youngest one, and they were there a little less than a year and so I got myself together, got a job with the government and got this house and got my children back before a year was up.

Linda: What kind of work did you do for the government?

Gladys: I worked with DOD the last job I had was with decorations and awards, the first job I had was with what was then Army Nurse Corps.

Linda: So DOD would be Department of Defense?

Gladys: Yes.

Linda: Where was your office?

Gladys: The Army Nurse Corps was in the old main building in D.C., the I worked at the La Font Plaza place Forestall Building and my last job with awards was in D.C., right off the Beltway the Hoffman Building.

Linda: Tell me about commuting like when you first started working and now.

Gladys: I took the bus to 7 corners and transferred to D.C. around 1967 and coming back I took a bus. Later on I got in a car pool and later on I got a car, finally did that. Getting up each morning and having my oldest child take my youngest across the street to a neighbor and the others went off to school.

Linda: What school did they attend?

Gladys: Falls Church High and West Long Elementary up here.

Linda: Did they have a middle school then?

Gladys: No, now wait a minute in my day they didn't have middle school and there were only 11 years of school, there were 7 in elementary and 4 in high so that makes 11.

Linda: I wonder when they added the 12th one.

Gladys: I don't know but I felt so funny on job applications everybody completed 12 and I only completed 11. I had a hard time at work sometimes because the people would get a kick out of my kids calling all

the time, “Mom, Anne is climbing out the bathroom window with a suitcase” and I told Robin to tell Anne to use the front door because it was easier. They gave me some problems but the all grew up honest and all that.

Linda: Wonderful, the changes that you have seen in the Fairfax County area, tell me about those.

Gladys: Right now when I go out I am glad to get back into the house, there is congestion everywhere. Of course I have to get out sometime. It is really a big change I remember when Columbia Pike was a two way street no big broad highway like it is now.

Linda: I think that it is interesting that as a child you could take a bus and to into Washington, D.C., for your ballet lessons there must have been some good planning back then for you.

Gladys: Back then, I don’t know whether they put me on the bus or not but my dancing teacher would meet me at the bus terminal when I arrived and then we went up to her place for dancing lessons.

Linda: I liked the story you told me before we started about your brother milking a cow and you and your friend, tell us about that.

Gladys: Me and a girlfriend were sneaking around the barn and peaking in and trying to listen to what they were saying and one of them caught us and aimed the cow’s udder right at us and got us wet.

Linda: With fresh warm milk.

Gladys: Yes, but we had plenty of milk. I think I remember back then we had cats and my dad had a very strict rule not to let them in the house they are made to catch mice not to be in the house. But I use to sneak one in the house and put doll clothes on it and dress it up.

Lind: Tell me about the horses.

Gladys: They were mostly workhorses, but we did have a riding horse, I had a picture of it with me sitting on it, but I don't know what happened to it. I heard something that didn't make sense that we were keeping Arthur Godfrey's horse, but why would we keep that if he had a place up the country, I don't understand.

Linda: Unless he wanted to be closer to town for some reason. And, Arthur Godfrey was the radio and TV personality.

Gladys: That was back in my mother's time and I think she had a crush on him. Him and Kate Smith.

Linda: There is a barn near and I think it was his hunting lodge over off of Hunter Mill Road in the Dranesville area further out. Anyway the story is in this barn in the 60's he would call Square Dances in this big old barn, which is still there, for the neighbors in this big old barn off of Hunter Mill Road. Hunter Mill Road has now been deemed a byway so hopefully that old barn will stay.

Gladys: Most of my brothers went up to Ritcheyville, Gainesville, Warrenton area and they had farm animals up there until they quit.

Linda: I am looking at a picture on your wall of the farm house tell me about it.

Gladys: Well let's see, we had a huge kitchen and I had a table that was sitting in the middle of my kitchen. As you walk into the front door there was a little room where you could hang your coats there and then you would go and go down into the kitchen but you could make a turn and go upstairs and there were two stairways leading to upstairs.

Linda: Your father built this farmhouse?

Gladys: He had it built I guess.

Linda: This was the move from Fairlington to Annandale and that is where he bought the 89 acres?

Gladys: Then he started building the farm. There were two barns; the silo, dairy and I remember seeing someway he processed the milk. You would pour it over this metal weighted thing, I guess that cooled it and then you put it in a big milk can and set it in a vat of cold water. I remember them trying to get me to learn how to get eggs from the chicken house; you just lift up the chicken an reach under, but the chicken started pecking at me and I refused to do it anymore.

Linda: Did you have pigs?

Gladys: Yes we had pigs.

Linda: So you had everything you needed in the way of food.

Gladys: If we had a cow butchered we sent it off to have it done to whoever did it. I remember picking string beans and things like that.

Linda: Did you help plant in the garden or was it a very large garden where it was done by machinery?

Gladys: No it wasn't real large but they might have cultivated it with one of the plows or something like that. I remember when I was working and my mother had the kids or one kid later we had a little manual lawn mower and on the weekends I would cut all the grass. I was trying to help pay my way; I don't think they use manual lawn mowers at all anymore.

Linda: No I don't think they do, I can remember using those when I was a kid in the 40's and growing up.

Gladys: It was good exercise.

Linda: Yes, it was. Tell me some of your activities as a youngster, you went into Washington to do dancing and what other things did you do?

Gladys: Well, I guess that was about it I had a girlfriend who lived within walking distance down Gallows Road and she later became a professional

singer and we use to be together all the time. Do you remember Martha Raye, she was on a musical with her and I watched her on TV.

Linda: What was her name?

Gladys: Katharine Milroy she was real pretty and had blonde hair. I think her older sister, I have some articles about the, was in musicals too. We had fun.

Linda: So you said that the depression did not affect you because you were self-sufficient.

Gladys: I don't remember any hard times; I just remember some gas rationing.

Linda: How about World War II? What are your memories of that time?

Gladys: I remember 4 brothers went in out of 5, I think I have a picture of one of them.

This is my first grandkid with my first daughter in front of the house, this is one of my brothers and this is just my sister and one of her girlfriends playing around.

I remember the workhorses pulling hay up to the top of the barn, however they did it, they put a big fork in there and then the horses go forward and the fork raises.

Linda: Oh yes, they have a pulley up to the hayloft.

Gladys: Anything else you can think of?

Linda: Just your memories and the fun things you can think of or anything you can remember about the local government or establishment of local parks.

Gladys: When did World War II end? I remember I was in the movie when it was announced and everybody came out and was yelling and kissing each other. I remember one of my brothers coming home and he wanted to surprise my parents on coming home from overseas so he came in the back of the basement door and my father heard something. He said who's there and my brother didn't answer because he wanted to surprise them so dad got his gun and said who is there? Then my brother walked right in and that was kind of scary not to say anything, I remember that part. I had one brother who joined because he wanted to go into the Marines because he thought they were tough. My others went into the Army, my one brother was in the Philippines and he remembers bad action there and use to tell us about it. One was in China and Germany and I guess we were lucky that all 4 came back.

Linda: Yes, well I thank you very much for this interview and I will borrow some of these pictures.

[Recording paused]

Gladys: Well we purchased the house in 1926 and it burned in September of 29.

Linda: This is the house in Annandale?

Gladys: Annandale, there was a piece or article in the paper that said destroyed by fire. I was born in 28 and the house burned in 29. In May of 52 he sold some land to Broyhill.

Linda: Part of the 89 acres?

Gladys: Yes and in July of 58 he sold some land to the Mormon Church.

Linda: Now, Broyhill would have built Broyhill Park?

Gladys: Is Broyhill Park right off of Graham Road here?

Linda: Yes it is, so I guess there is another area. The house was burned in 29 and the rebuilt?

Gladys: Yes they rebuilt and I have some papers showing about insurance and things. I didn't even know I had that box of papers upstairs, I am still going through it and if I find anything different.

Linda: Okay and I have this from Saturday January 26, 1980 Washington Post. I am going to borrow that if I may.

Gladys: Okay.

Linda: It is Charlene B. Oliver who owned a dairy farm, and I believe that is your mother. I will make copies of all of these and return them to you. Thank you again.